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G.O.P. Plans to Give Environment Rules a Free-Market Tilt

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 7 - With the elections over, Congress and the Bush administration are moving ahead with ambitious environmental agendas that include revamping signature laws on air pollution and endangered species and reviving a moribund energy bill that would open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to energy exploration.

In addition, the administration intends to accelerate conservation efforts by distributing billions of dollars to private landowners for the preservation of wetlands and wildlife habitats. The White House also plans to announce next month a new effort to clean up the Great Lakes.

The groundwork for the push was laid down in the past four years even as environmental groups, Congressional moderates and the courts put the brakes on major changes. But the election returns that gave Mr. Bush a clear victory and expanded the Republicans' majorities in Congress have emboldened those determined to hard-wire free-market principles into all environmental policy.

"The election is a validation of our philosophy and agenda," Michael O. Leavitt, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, said in an interview. "We will make more progress in less time while maintaining economic competitiveness for the country. That is my mission."

Representative Joe L. Barton of Texas, chairman of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, said he was eager to get the process started and encouraged the environmental groups and Democrats who typically oppose Republican initiatives "to come out of the trenches and meet me halfway."

But with industry groups anticipating relaxed regulations and environmental groups fighting to retain stiff regulations, the environmental debate over the next four years could be contentious.

"What you're going to see is an administration focused on setting broad goals and then letting states and companies and individuals work to achieve those, within an economic framework," said Charles Wehland, a lawyer for Jones Day in Chicago who represents clients like the OGE Energy Corporation and the Great Lakes Chemical Corporation. But Phil Clapp, president of the National Environmental Trust, a nonprofit group, warned the White House and Congressional leadership that it would be risky to further push the agenda of the last four years.

"George Bush doesn't have to run again, but Republican lawmakers do," Mr. Clapp said. "They know there is a cost to their political association with rolling back environmental laws."

Nationally, the environment was a sleeper issue that never awoke. But concern for environmental and conservation issues was sometimes visible at the local level. Montana voters, for instance, rejected an initiative to overturn a ban on a form of mining cyanide, effectively blocking a large new mine on the Blackfoot River.

Bush administration officials say that among the first measures moving toward enactment will be those that govern air pollution levels. The administration initiative known as Clear Skies, which generated lukewarm support in Congress during Mr. Bush's first term, is about to come out of mothballs. Will Hart, a spokesman for Senator James M. Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who is chairman of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, said it was Mr. Inhofe's "No. 1 environmental issue."

Clear Skies establishes lower emission standards for pollutants like nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide and mercury, but environmental groups complain that it does not reduce them as much or as soon as levels set forth in a competing bill or by enforcement of the Clean Air Act.

Senator James M. Jeffords, the Vermont independent who is the ranking minority member of the committee and a co-sponsor of the competing bill, said it saddened him that Mr. Bush was leading efforts to undermine air standards that his father, the first President Bush, supported. Citing the new alignment in the Senate - 55 Republicans, 44 Democrats and himself - Mr. Jeffords said, "We have the power to block any measure detrimental to the environment."

But even if a Clear Skies bill fades again, Mr. Leavitt said he intended to enact its regulatory equivalent, the Clean Air Interstate Rule, a "cap-and-trade" approach to lowering emissions that would set pollution levels for 29 Eastern states and the District of Columbia, by the end of the year. Such approaches allow companies flexibility on how to meet standards, including trading pollution credits.

For now, the Bush administration has no intention of regulating the heat-trapping gases, like carbon dioxide, which scientists believe contribute to global warming.

A top priority of powerful Congressional Republicans is the 31-year-old Endangered Species Act. Representative Richard W. Pombo of California, chairman of the Committee on Resources, has made efforts to raise the hurdles that scientists must clear to ensure a government determination that a species is endangered and cut back the amount of critical habitat required. Habitat designations pave the way for land use controls.

"We will put these back together and really start trying to figure out how we can put together a bipartisan compromise," Mr. Pombo said in a recent interview.

On issues like ranching, hydropower and logging, he said, humans are competing with other species in the same territory. "It's unrealistic to say that humans are not part of the environment and are not going to have an impact," he said. "We need to say, 'These two trains are on the same track; how do we get them not to crash?' "

The energy bill will pass, he said, adding that any bill produced in the House would open 2,000 acres of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for energy exploration.

A third priority, Mr. Pombo said, is a package of legislation dealing with ocean resources, including issues like the controls appropriate for commercial and sport fisheries, the protection of endangered marine mammals and the mandate of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

Dana Perino, a spokeswoman for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said in an interview on Friday that the administration, like Mr. Pombo, put a high priority on the energy bill and the oceans issue. Ms. Perino also said the administration was eager to disburse the unspent portion of the \$40 billion appropriated by Congress for conservation initiatives undertaken by farmers and private landowners.

Interior Secretary Gale A. Norton, through her spokeswoman, Tina Kreisher, declined to be interviewed about her agency's top priorities until Mr. Bush decided who would serve in his new cabinet.

Several pending actions to open up wild areas of the West to energy development could be made final in the coming weeks, touching on areas like Roan Plateau in Colorado and Otero Mesa in New Mexico.

David Alberswerth, an expert on public lands issues with the Wilderness Society, agreed that the Republican gains in Congress had increased the difficulty of blocking a law opening the Alaska refuge, but he cautioned that some Bush voters already opposed energy development projects in their regions.

"When the Bush administration came into office four years ago, you didn't have ranchers and farmers and hunters and anglers upset about their energy agenda," Mr. Alberswerth said. "The administration will continue to pursue the same policies they have pursued, and I'm confident that if they do, they will encounter opposition from that quarter."

Jim Range, the chairman of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a coalition of hunting and fishing groups whose members include some staunch conservatives who are also conservationists, said energy development would be "an issue that hits the ground running."

Mr. Range's group is split over the Alaska issue and would probably sit out that debate, he said. "But in regard to other energy development, particularly on federal lands," he said, "there's a consensus that we ought to do energy development but we ought to do it right."